

*Belomor: Criminality and Creativity in Stalin's Gulag*. By Julie Draskoczy (Myths and Taboos in Russian Culture) Boston: Academic Studies Press.2014 pp. ISBN 978-1-618112-88-0

The vast bibliography of scholarly research about the Gulag is typically flawed by the lack of monographs about the art and literature produced within the Soviet camps. The reasons for such a problem can be multiple, and can include the limited availability of the primary sources, the poor aesthetic quality of the creative works produced within the camps, and the risk of sympathizing with the authors of the works.

Julie Draskoczy decided to run these risks and face the endeavour of studying the creative works of the inmates involved in the construction of the White Sea–Baltic canal with the ambitious aim of explaining how the simultaneous presence of a destructive context and of a wide range of creative texts is due to the fact that ‘the prison camp embraces the life-affirming thrust within violence itself, the possibility of creation within destruction’ (p. 12). The analysis provided by the author in the introductory chapter and in the following five seems adequate to such a task: Draskoczy’s view of how the criminal prisoners of the Belomorkanal camps rebuilt themselves through ‘creative selfhood’ (p. 21), although derived from Jochen Hellbeck, is effectively demonstrated by the study of the material presented throughout the book. The most outstanding feature of this book is probably the unpublished material it includes and its analysis as presented by the author (see, for instance, the autobiography of the ‘dead’ and ‘reborn’ prisoner Andrei Kupriianov (pp. 17-18); the study of the ‘inverse perekovka’ through Grigorii Koshelev’s autobiography (pp. 61-64); and the gender issue raised through Praskov’ia Skachko’s and Motia Podgorskaia’s texts (pp. 160-62)). This, together with the wide range of cultural objects analysed (art, theatre, poetry, autobiographies, songs, *chastushki*, tattoos, etc.), testifies to the extremely precious work done by the author, who managed to recover from Russian state archives and from secondary sources a very interesting set of material for her work. However, at the base of Draskoczy’s interpretation of the material lie some core questions that, although explained in detail in the book, seem not fully convincing. The notion of the camps of the Belomorkanal as a ‘synecdoche’ of Soviet society is based on the idea that Soviet life was pervaded by physical violence: ‘It is impossible to forget [. . .] the role violence played in everyday life in the Soviet Union. Raw physicality invades every aspect of Soviet culture, a physicality only augmented by the viciousness of life in prison’ (p 15). While this is surely true for the prisons and camps, it is hard to demonstrate that such ‘physicality’ and violence were part of the everyday life of Soviet people throughout both the history and the expansion of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the idea expressed by the author in the introduction that ‘Soviet incarceration was entirely unique’ and that ‘what made it different [. . .] [was] one very simple, yet perhaps surprising element: art’ is surprising in itself and leads to the main question related to this book: can the camps of the Belomorkanal be taken as a good example in order to study the whole system of Stalinist camps, even in regard to only one topic? The title of the book suggests so; however, it is doubtful whether the camps in Kolyma or those in use during the war, or even the camps created during the *ekspedtsii* (i.e. the expeditions organized in the late 1920 and 1930s in order to explore new geographic areas of development in the camp system), can be analysed through the prism utilized by Draskoczy. While this specific viewpoint is open to question, and the bibliography lacks some fundamental titles, such as Natalia Kuziakina’s

*Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, trans. by Boris M. Meerovich (Luxembourg and Newark, NJ: Harwood Academic, 1995; repr. Routledge: Abingdon, 2013), there is no doubt about the quality of this research, which the author has carried out with devotion, enthusiasm, and—interestingly enough—creativity. Following the path paved by Cynthia Ruder (*Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998)), Draskoczy's book is one of the few monographs devoted to the analysis of creativity within the camp. It shows how insightful, inspirational, surprising, and productive research on the Gulag from within, using the documents written or created by prisoners during the time they spent there, can be.